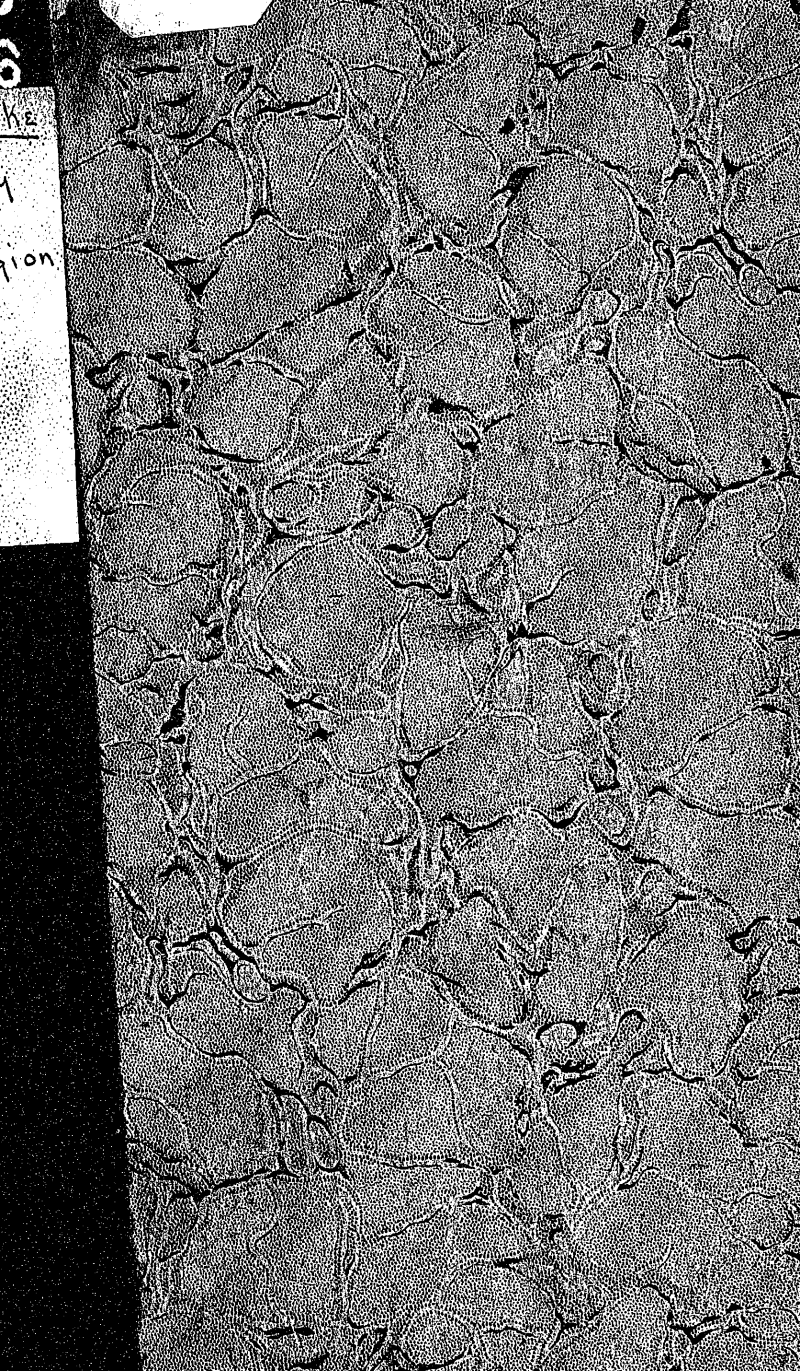




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NOTE

This address, delivered at the opening of the Theological Department of Colgate University, in Hamilton, N. Y., for the year 1896-97, is now gratefully dedicated to the students, whose generous appreciation first caused it to appear in print.

MYSTERY IN RELIGION

OUR Seminary once more opens its doors to welcome us, and we come, old friends and new together, to sit down in this quiet place and learn the truth. This is our purpose here, this and nothing lower—to learn together as we may the living and powerful truth of God. The end of our presence here is not the studying of books, the learning of languages, the acquiring of methods, the mastering of systems. All these are means rather than ends, steps that may be important but are not final. We are here to learn the truth of God concerning religion, and the best way of using it for the practical ends of the gospel. Let us set this high aim distinctly before us at the beginning, and take the oath of allegiance to it here to-night. No lower aim is worthy of us, and none should any man of us for a moment entertain. Humbly, fearlessly, and hopefully, we must set ourselves to learn the truth of God and the way to use it. May God keep us loyal to this high endeavor.

The field of our study we call the field of Theology—for are we not, teachers and students to-

gether, a theological seminary? Yet this name does not tell the exact truth about our calling. Our field is the field of religion. Theology is a study, but religion is an experience. Theology is a science, but religion is a life. Theology is the study of religion, and when we study theology we are studying religion. I cannot stay to prove or illustrate this at present, but I offer it as a fact that gives great light upon the character of our work. Students of religion are we—students not of a system merely, but of an experience; not of a science, but of a life. We are students of the life of man in fellowship with God. How gloriously does this conception of our theme broaden our field and enrich the subject of our study! No limits confine us here. All that pertains to the life of man in fellowship with God lies within our field, and all the charm and richness of experience comes in to fascinate us as we bend over our work. No study is so full of vitality and power as this study of religion itself, the noblest, profoundest, and most enduring element in the life of man; and to this study we are now to give ourselves. Within these walls we study the living God and the living humanity; we study God's revelation and man's experience; God's providence and man's religious history; God's salvation and man's destiny; God's call of grace, and the most useful ways of serving

God and man in holy ministry. These are living themes of religion itself; and we must all think of ourselves here as students not merely of theology, but of religion.

In preparation for our work, I shall speak to-night of one element in religion of which all men have had experience, and with which we shall constantly have to do. I mean the element of MYSTERY IN RELIGION. It is an ever-present element, now darkening and now glorious, now perplexing and now full of inspiration. We cannot be students without meeting it, and upon the manner in which we learn to deal with it will depend much of our success. Let us think of it to-night.

Need I attempt to define mystery? It is better to illustrate it. We all know how we come upon it, and with what sensations we meet it. When we begin to study it is easy to assume that we are to find what we seek, and we seek clear knowledge. If we are successful, we shall obtain definite results that we can put into clear statements. This seems a reasonable expectation, and one without which we might scarcely be willing to study—for what other result would duly reward our labor? Begin then with this expectation. Investigate your facts in any field of study. You accomplish what you hoped. Certainty does not elude you. Clear statements you obtain. Suppose that you are work-

ing in the science of physics, and reach the clear and certain law that bodies attract one another in proportion to their mass, and inversely according to the square of their distance. What can be clearer than that? or more mysterious? Bodies? What are bodies that they should attract one another? What is the attractive power? whence came it? and where does it reside? You have described the mode of operation of some power that lies far beyond your searching. When will you be ready to report in plain terms upon this something that you have described in its working, but not defined? Your solid statement rests upon a foundation of mystery, of which, search as you may, you can find neither bottom nor end.

This is a good illustration of mystery, and it may serve us better than a definition. What we have thus found in one place we find everywhere. We speak of the mystery of life, in tree or plant, in insect or in man; of the mystery of electrical force; of the mystery of the union of soul and body; of the mystery of the will; of the mystery of God's sovereignty and man's freedom; of the mystery of the incarnation; of the mystery of the new birth; of the mystery of death and immortality; of the mystery of the Trinity; of the mystery of a blade of grass. In all these cases, diverse as they are, we mean by the word essentially the

same thing, and it is substantially what we meant when we found the mystery of attractive force drawing bodies together—we mean that the subject of our thoughts is greater than any statements that we can make about it; that after all has been said, when all our knowledge has been well laid out and classified, there is a vast deep stretching away beneath and beyond; that the subject of our thought is beyond our grasping, and we see no way to make it otherwise. Even concerning the knowledge that we possess and are able to make good use of, we are compelled to say, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it."

Not that the sense of mystery is always encountered in the same manner, or awakens the same sensations. There are at least two forms of experience about it, and of these we need to think. Sometimes we feel that the facts are simply too great for us; and sometimes we are startled and perplexed to find that the facts seem to us inconsistent with one another. The sense of mystery is sometimes the simple sense of the surpassing greatness of the things with which we have to do, and sometimes the dreadful sense that these great things do not harmonize together, but contradict one another and are irreconcilable. The one name of mystery covers these two things, widely though

they differ. When we ask, what makes the heart keep beating? what keeps the blood aflow? how vocal organs convey thought from mind to mind? we answer that these matters are veiled in mystery, and the answer is true. But by this confession we are not troubled; we are only awed and thrilled with wonder and impelled to seek deeper for understanding of the matter, if by any means we may come to know it through and through. In the realm to which we give the general name of science, this is the interpretation that we oftenest give to mystery; it is the veil of greatness that hides from us the full meaning of the things that we are bending over. Mystery thus viewed does not trouble us, but lures us on; we desire to dispel it for our own satisfaction, and yet we can endure it with full contentment. Mystery, we feel, is the inseparable companion of our ignorance; if it always remains, that will simply mean that the universe is too vast for us, and its meaning too deep for our comprehension. But in the realm of religion our experience is apt to be different. When we ask (to take an illustration familiar beyond almost all others), how is it that God is God indeed, with that control over his works which he must have if he is true God at all, and man is nevertheless that free and responsible being which he knows himself to be, and which religion itself

requires that he must be? we answer still that these matters are veiled in mystery, but we do not say it in the same tone as before. Our tone is often troubled. The two things seem incompatible. One of the two, God's sovereignty or man's freedom, perhaps one and perhaps the other, may appear to us certainly and necessarily true, while the other seems inconsistent with it. Yet both seem taught us by highest authority, and both seem necessarily a part of the world that God made and man lives in. This we call a mystery—a mystery, namely, that two things should seem incompatible and yet both be true. In the realm to which we give the name of religion, mystery is the name that is often given to the heart-breaking sense of the reality of the impossible. Things contradictory co-exist, and this is mystery, and mystery dark and troublesome.

Hence in the world of religion there has often been resort to a relief that in the world of science has never been sought. In religion it has sometimes been taught that mysteries that troubled us and seemed insoluble were matters that lay above reason, or beyond reason. It has not been admitted that they were contrary to reason, but that they were above it or beyond its field has often been proposed as a relief to our perplexity.

This proposal for relief will prove our best guide

into the truth concerning mystery in religion, and what it really is. If we see in what sense this is wise counsel and in what sense it is not, we shall be better able to estimate mystery. Now at the outset we must hold it fast, as a thing eternally certain, that in the universe of God there is absolutely nothing that is either above reason or beyond reason. When we are told that any mystery of his universe is above reason or beyond it, we are told what is not true. God is himself the perfect and eternal reason. His work is rational. The universe is an expression of the eternal reason. When we find something that we cannot understand, it is not open to us to say that here something has slipped in that rational processes cannot account for. Nothing that exists in any world is to be explained by releasing it from under the sway of reason. This we must hold fast forever. But we may freely admit that some mystery that we have encountered is above our reason, or beyond our reason, in its present state and with its present data. Some mystery may even present facts that are against reason, or irrational, to us to-day, with our untrained powers and limited knowledge. The most reasonable truth may be unreasonable to a mind that does not see it in full, true light. To us, narrow, childish, and untaught, with scant sympathy with the eternal mind and

heart in its infinite reasonableness, many things may be beyond rational explanation for the present, which we have only to see as they are, to call very truths of the eternal reason.

Perhaps this is what is meant, when things mysterious in religion are declared to be above reason or beyond it. Perhaps it is meant simply that they are now beyond or above the human reason that is seeking to understand them. If this, which is often true, is what is meant, this is what ought to be said; for it is most misleading and dangerous to use language that seems to declare anything in God's world to be essentially beyond the field of reason. To affirm such a thing is to deny that the eternal reason has universal sway, and thus to leave ourselves in mental darkness from which there is no relief till this denial is withdrawn. To limit the field of reason is to limit the field of God. Mystery is not to be relieved by saying that God has no dominion over it.

The truth is that mystery in religion is like mystery in science, or anywhere else. Let us breathe the secret. The mystery always seems to reside in the thing that is studied, but it does not. The cause of the mystery resides in the mind that is studying. Mystery is the effect of greatness upon minds that are unequal to it, or are insufficiently informed.

Do not doubt this, but behold it illustrated and confirmed. We speak of the mystery of life in ourselves—of the union of mind and body, the nature of the vital process, the meaning of that dissolution which we call death. We confess that we have no key to the mystery, and probably shall not find one; life eludes the living, and how it is that we live we are not likely to know. But never for a moment do we doubt that there is a rational explanation of the mystery somewhere. We know that life is rational; that there is no essential mystery in life itself, or in the union of body and soul, or in the great dissolution; that these realities all have their method, which is absolutely a reasonable method, and one that rational powers, even our own, could grasp, if it were fully placed before them. We with our childish powers and training and our fragmentary knowledge, do not hold the clue for rational interpretation, but we know there is a clue. The mystery has its cause in us.

Or, look at what we call a most mysterious element in external nature, electricity. We watch the play of this marvelous agent, rending the sky in the lightning, coloring the north in the aurora borealis, carrying man's messages on the telegraph and his voice in the telephone, bringing him light and heat and tractive energy, moving through all nature, doing things most unexpected and accom-

plishing what seemed impossible; and we stand awed, excited, quivering with eagerness, before the mystery of this weird invisible, enemy and friend at once to man. But we never for a moment imagine that there is any real mystery about it, mystery essential and insoluble. We know that electricity has its method, as strict and invariable, as rational and right, as the method of any other element in the universe. We know that both its nature and its working would be perfectly intelligible to any rational mind that had the due range of power and information. The secret of all mystery that we find in electricity lies in us and in our ignorance.

These illustrations, one from nature and one from life, agree in confirming this, that what God has made is rationally plain, but is mysterious to us because it is too great for us. Our subject, mystery in religion, provides a third illustration, to precisely the same effect. Mystery in religion is like other mystery; it arises from imperfect understanding of what is rational and intelligible enough, but is too great for us at present to understand. Hear now the word of the Lord concerning the things that he has made. All things in the universe of God are rational, plain and free from mystery, provided only there is a mind great enough to comprehend them and judge them as

they are. It is a straightforward, honorable universe, conducted according to eternal reason by the holy and gracious God. To the one Mind that is great enough to comprehend it, it contains no mysteries. But to our minds, only just now created in God's image, untrained to high thinking, and unexperienced in the noblest love, it is a realm of mystery. It is too great for us, and mystery is our name for its greatness beyond our range. The secret of the mystery lies not in that which God has made, which to him is absolutely clear and plain, but in the limitation of our powers and knowledge.

In this light we can understand the two effects of mystery already mentioned, one sad and perplexing, the other inspiring and joyful. We look upon things too great for us to comprehend, and they seem not to agree well together. Contradictions appear to us inherent in the universal frame. The mystery alarms us, for we cannot find the unity that is indispensable to rest for our souls. This is one result. But on the other hand we may be charmed by the mystery that hangs as a veil over all things great, and over all things because all are great. We gaze because of what we clearly see, and not less because every look suggests far more than it reveals. Seeing so much more beyond, we glow with hope of what may yet be

opened to us. This is the other result. Both are intelligible, when once we know what mystery really is.

But the same knowledge teaches us that one of these results should be temporary, while the other abides forever. Mystery of contradiction, with all its power to afflict our souls, fades away in presence of settled belief in the rationality of God. The rationality of God is an eternal guaranty against the existence of essential contradictions in that which he has made; and settled belief in the divine rationality has inexpressible power to soothe and heal the troubled soul. When we have learned this lesson, and are sure that God has produced no essential and insoluble mysteries, since his eternal reason reigns supreme, then we may drop our fears of mystery, as if it might be fatal to our peace, and permit it to be the glorious thing that God intends. Well knowing God our Father, we part company with the heart-breaking mysteries, even though the facts that forced them on us still remain. Do we ask—to turn at once to the greatest of them all—whether the problem of evil must not darken all our days? We answer that it is a problem dark and terrible to questioners who stand where we stand, able to see so small a section even of this present human world, ignorant of so much that is known to God. We confess that the prob-

lem of evil is too great for us, and is dark enough to darken all our day. But we add this to our answer, that to God there is no problem of evil. He understands. To him this whole field lies open, clear, and plain. Surely we do not doubt it? We do not think that he too is like one of us, in the dark about his own work, not understanding what he has in hand? To think this is to deny that he is God at all. Faith rises to affirm that to the eternal reason the problem of evil is all clear, and the world is worthy of God. When we believe this, the problem is changed for us. Evil is not changed, but we know that there is One who understands it; and we can go our way fighting it, free from the heart-breaking fear that this enemy may yet conquer our faith and lead us prisoners to the castle of despair.

For our present purpose, therefore, we may leave these mysteries of contradiction, and turn with swelling hearts to that realm where mystery in religion is either a veil upon glory, or glory itself. Concerning this mystery which is mystery of greatness—mystery of breadth and length and depth and height—I desire that we may reverently think together. This field of unutterable wonder does not belong to religion alone. Mystery in religion is simply a department of universal mystery, and it has the same meaning as mystery everywhere.

I know how commonplace it is to say that mystery is everywhere. It has been said a thousand times, yet I may say it again, and for a moment I must dwell upon it. The fact is that we shall not think rightly of mystery in the realm of religion until we know by experience what it is to see mystery everywhere, and consciously to walk as men encompassed by it on every side. Walk up on a bright morning by the path that leads through the woods to the door of our seminary, and tell me how many mysteries you have passed in coming; how many, I mean, of those things that may be perfectly familiar to you, indeed, but baffle you hopelessly if you seek to know them thoroughly. Lift your eyes to the sun, or let them fall upon the tiny moss beside the path. Think of the trees in their beauty, or of the decaying mould at their feet, or of the seed that the tree yields and the mould nourishes. Think of the insect life that is hidden away in the earth, or of the birds that sing in the branches. Hold up the mirror of thought to yourself, a spirit that sees and knows, and takes wondering note of all the life and beauty, and is aware of mysteries. Which of all these objects that you observe can you account for? Which can you expound as if you understood it? How far into any of them can you look? Some true things about them you can say, but how soon you reach

your limit! Only notice what radical mysteries are here. You feel the mystery of life, to which you know no solution—life in tree, in insect, and in man. Where there is life and where there is none, you come alike upon the mystery of matter, the problem what it is; and you cannot solve it. Whatever the object of your thought may be, living or not living, you encounter the great underlying, universal mystery of existence—how anything came to exist and what existence signifies. Your walk through the woods is a walk through the world of mystery, and so is every walk that you ever take, in places strange or familiar, amid objects great or small; while meantime you carry in your own person all these mysteries—the mystery of existence, the mystery of matter, and the mystery of life, together with the crowning mystery of the soul, able to estimate mysteries and seek to solve them. Thus full of mystery is the actual world in which we live. Not by invention do we find it so, but by discovery. Closed eyes do not see it, but when our eyes are open, behold, this is the world in which we are. We do not live according to truth until we see mystery everywhere, and our daily consciousness is pervaded by the sense of it.

As to the real nature and meaning of the universal mystery, our illustration from our own bit

of wildwood will lead us to the truth concerning it as well as any that we could discover. What is the mystery, ever present and ever eluding us, in this bit of forest? Need I speak the word? It is no other than the mystery of God himself. Here, as I have said, we encounter the mystery of life, the mystery of matter, and the mystery of existence. What and whence is the life of tree and fern, of insect, bird, and squirrel? What is the inorganic matter in our grove, and what qualities does it possess? and what fits it to serve as the organ and medium of life? And how came the whole into being? and what does its existence signify? Concerning all this we may have our theories of creation or evolution, as we find reason for them, but they do not go to the depths of the question. Life, matter, and existence have their ground and source in God. The mystery that haunts our forest day and night is the mystery of God himself, of his activity, of his indwelling, of his relation to the things upon which we look. This is that mystery which eludes us, that unseen reality which underlies all that we see. How he is related to his creation, and his creation to him; how he touches the things that are and holds them in being; what power and love flow forth from him into his works and what he means by it all; these are the unanswered questions that look out

upon us in our little forest, and everywhere we go. When we know all about God, we shall know all about this bit of wildwood, and only then. That underlying greatness which all nature shows us in glimpses, but does not reveal, is God himself.

This oneness of mystery, the mystery of God in all, is what Tennyson has expressed in the well-known lines :

Flower in the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
Hold you here, root and all, in my hand—
Little flower—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Nothing could be more true. One mystery underlies all things, and it is the mystery of God. This, we must now notice, is the same as to say that all mystery everywhere, in nature, life, and mind, leads directly on into the heart of our subject. All roads lead hither, to the mystery of the self-revealing God ; and this is the mystery of religion.

Note the difference, however. In religion we meet the universal mystery in the region of the spirit. We are working in the realm where God moves farthest, if we may say so, toward his creation, and makes his closest approach to the highest creature that he has placed in the world. In religion we encounter the mystery of spiritual con-

tact and influence. Religion rests upon the fact that "spirit and Spirit can meet"—man can commune with God, and God can dwell in man. Here we encounter the mystery of providence, the mystery of redeeming love and help, the mystery of spiritual intercourse, the mystery of transformation. Mystery in religion is the mystery of God and the soul together.

Concerning the depth of this spiritual mystery, I should be inclined to say two things. On the one hand, I should expect this mystery of God and the soul to be profounder than any other. If there is really any difference in mysteries, and one is deeper than another, I should expect the deepest to be found where God, with the immensity of his spiritual resources, touches conscious, voluntary, responsible souls, intending to influence them and change their character. Compared with this, it seems to me, the work of God upon that which we call matter must be simple. His relation to matter is deeply wonderful, indeed; but the relation of the infinite Spirit to the finite spirit which it has created and is now befriending—a finite spirit free and responsible, and willful too—is still more deeply mysterious. And yet I should say, on the other hand, that the mystery of God's contact with the soul of man would be more intelligible than any mystery of God in matter. The contact of spirit with spirit is

more intelligible than the contact of spirit with anything else. We may not be more able to explain it, but we have more in our own experience to illustrate it. We are on more familiar ground, and have more to guide our understanding when we speak of God and man in fellowship, than when we speak of the mystery of God in nature. Here the relations are at least personal; and so the deepest mystery of God is after all the one on which we have the clearest light to help us. For this we may well give thanks.

Even more should we give thanks for the character of the mystery that we find in religion—I mean in religion as we know it in Jesus Christ. Mystery here is glorious and inspiring, for it is revealing mystery, mystery not so much of darkness as of light. It glorifies more than it obscures. In it we see things that prophets and kings, philosophers and scientists, have desired to see but have not seen. In the light of it we see

Earth crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.

Only remember what the mystery is with which we are now concerned. When we speak of religion we are moving in that realm in which God comes nearest. The great insoluble is no other than the question how he can come so near, and

how things can be as they are in so close a presence of his gracious glory, and what new wonders his presence is destined to bring forth.

The real mystery of the spiritual contact of God with man is not mystery that suggests denial, or even doubt. It is not the stumbling, blundering wonder whether God has any spiritual contact with man. We know that he has. Spirit and spirit do meet. The life of religion is the life of our souls in such contact. To us, in Christ, the great fact is a living reality. We are not talking of an unanswerable question whether this can come to pass, but of the glorious mystery of the fact that this does come to pass, and of the mysterious glory that radiates from this truth and fills the world with the heavenly brightness of a living hope.

Think first of the mystery of God's self-revelation. That he does express himself to men; that he finds means of making himself known in humanity; that he was able to come in Jesus Christ, and make a revelation of his character full and clear, and tender, holy, glorious—a revelation such as man could never have imagined; that the unseen God stands thus manifest among us, showing in a human life what manner of God he is: this is the real mystery of religion, so far as God's self-revelation is concerned. This is a glorious mystery

for us to walk in, and to walk wondering. Do we ask how it occurred? by what process God was thus manifest in the flesh? and do we find that we cannot wholly explain it? Do we locate the mystery of God's revelation in the incomprehensibility of the incarnation? Is this the mystery that fixes our attention? It is true that here our explanations fail us, less or more, but we mistake if our chief wonder lies in this quarter. Mystery of this kind we can trust to the reasonableness of God. We know and are sure that he does only what the highest reason dictates. If we should never be able fully to solve the problem of the incarnation,—which may well prove to be the case,—we could rest in this, that what God does is absolutely rational, and there is nothing dark or perplexing in it, if only the whole were known. Of the fact that God has shown himself among men in Christ we are certain, and the mystery that we have most to do with is the mysterious glory that hangs about this fact. In the presence of such a revelation we walk wondering. What glory and what wonder that God should come, and his tabernacle should be among men, and he should dwell among them! What a character is thus revealed! What heights and depths of glory does it contain! How dimly is it seen thus far, despite the clearness of his revealing! Who knows what light is yet to stream

forth upon the world from that same face of Jesus Christ in which we see the glory? How divinely the light of that character irradiates all that it falls upon! How it solves the problem of life! How it opens new mysteries too, but only to bring in due time a divine solution! What superabundance of fullness there is in this revelation of God! what undeveloped possibilities of grace and truth and life! The latent possibilities of good in Christ lie before us with infinite attractiveness. We do not wish that we could see all there is in him. So winning a mystery is something to receive with thankfulness and to wait upon with joyful hope.

Think also of the mystery of God's contact with the individual soul through the Holy Spirit. Here the life of personal religion begins, and in this realm it has its being. We might stand perplexed, as many do, because we could not tell how God is able to communicate thus secretly and powerfully with a human soul. The question moves in a region where we are ignorant. How one human soul acts upon another we do not know and are not likely to discover; much less how God acts upon a man. But here again we find our peace in the rationality of God. He will never violate the nature he has created, or in anything act against the perfect reason. We know that a solution of the mystery of spiritual influence exists, and is a per-

fect and reasonable solution, worthy of God. In other words, we know that there is no real mystery here, but only a mystery to our ignorance. But as to the fact itself, that God does touch the human spirit with a holy, friendly, renewing influence, and works in it the purpose of his grace—as to this we have no doubt; and this is a fact alive and glowing with mysterious energies. What a world of possibilities does it open for us to wonder, pray, and work in! A missionary was founding a new station on the Congo, and obtained the service of natives to bring him timber from the forest, to erect a house in which he might serve them in the Lord. Watching them at the work, he wrote, “How little do they suspect that after a time they will begin to be moved with strange troublings in the spirit, which they cannot cure for themselves, but must be cured of by the invisible God, and that these inward movings will be connected with their bringing of these sticks to me!” He was contemplating the mystery of the present God, now working in the silence of the human soul. He was walking in the wonder of that glorious and inspiring mystery. Explain it? That was the least of his need. To glory in it, to see the world irradiated with the light of such possibilities as it suggests, and to promote the free working of this invisible but heavenly power—this is the use that

should be made of a mystery divine. "The things that are impossible to men are possible to God"—this is the keynote of the new song. It is a note of mystery, for it declares the possibility of the impossible, through the working of a more than human agent. That new song, of which this is the keynote, is the song with which we may gladden day and night, if we do but learn what use to make of the mystery of the present God.

Turn for a moment to one of the analogies of nature. The mystery of God's spiritual touch upon man is very like the mystery of electricity as it stands to-day. Here is an element in nature to which we have given a name, though we know little about it. Just what it is we may find out, but we are not waiting for that before we use it. It has already accomplished wonders under the hand of man, and stands ready to accomplish more. At present the question is, what it is to do next, and how far its revolutionary work is to go. When we speak of the mystery of electricity we may refer to the unsolved questions as to its nature, but we may just as well refer to its possibilities. Here is a mighty agent; the world is full of it and its energy is immeasurable. Oh, the mystery of such a force, evidently able to do far more than we have seen, ready whenever we are ready to serve us by working new and unimagined wonders! Oh

the marvel of a world thus full of a tremendous energy! Oh, the wonder of the boundless possibilities! This mighty presence in the world fills us with a sense of mystery corresponding to its unmeasured but waiting power.

There is another mighty agent in the world, this time a personal agent, moved by heart and will. God is here, in immediate contact and intercourse with men. God is here, the Holy Spirit. There is none like him. Already has he wrought wonders of spiritual transformation. He has made a people for his own possession, imperfect yet truly his own. He has wrought upon innumerable men, suggesting what is holy, effecting repentance, awakening faith, transforming character. He has had part in all worthy works that men have performed, and not without him has any good thing been done. We may find the mystery of the present God in the mode of his operation; but we shall do better to feel the mystery of the present God as a mystery of pervading power and boundless possibility. What will he do next? How next will his kingdom come and his will be done? The world is athrill with the spiritual energy of God, and we are athrill with interest in what will come of it. We look about us and try to forecast the divine working. He who can make one new creature can make a million; he who can change men can

change society. What is coming next? Where will he bring his holiness and love to bear upon our evil? What is the next great battle? Some battle worthy of God is certain to come on. What will it be? In what form will the infinite holiness and love be manifested, in setting right the relations between man and man and class and class, and bringing in the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness? When will the Mighty One be victorious? Here lies the inspiring mystery of the present God, a glorious mystery of divine possibilities (say rather of divine certainties yet unseen), in which we do well to walk with open eyes and open hearts. As we climb our hill, thrilling with the sense of the mystery of God in his creation, so we should walk all the ways of life aglow with the sense of the mystery of God present in the Spirit of his grace.

I need not say that it is in this same world of mystery that we are called to study. In everything that we touch, in the realm of theology and religion, there is present the whole greatness of God. There are matters of fact to come before us, indeed, on which we can reach clear certainty. Questions of historical evidence, for example, are to be settled in the light of common day. But when we come to the substance of religion itself, here is nothing small, nothing limited, nothing

completely comprehended. Nowhere has human understanding found the end. Everywhere wide vistas of possible knowledge open out before us. On every subject what we know is but a glimpse of what we may know. Flashes of the glory of God break out upon us from places where we fancied there was only darkness, or dimness at the best. Progress in the knowledge of God is endless. In such a world of divine mystery study is no light and easy thing. The very facts that make it glorious make it absorbing and exacting. In studying religion we are always studying God himself, in some form or part of his relation to men, and our entire work reaches out into the divine infinitude. Can we work slightly here, or judge rashly, or be childishly over-confident? Shall we expect always to understand what we find in this realm of thought? We believe in the rationality of God and are sure that we are studying what is true and reasonable; but we are constantly confronted by the deepest mysteries of being, and such knowledge is too wonderful for us; it is high, we cannot attain unto it. We encounter all the mystery that belongs to God's own depth and greatness, height and majesty. Often in the midst of our studies shall we be constrained to pause, and bow in reverence and say: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How

unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out ! For from him, and by him, and for him, are all things ; to whom be glory forever. Amen."

I do not wish to leave the subject without a few words upon what mystery in religion does for us. It is an element that we are sometimes inclined to resent. We almost think ourselves deprived of our rights if we cannot make clear statements that cover the whole field. Vagueness we suspect to be weakness, whatever the cause of it. A state in which there shall be no mystery often seems the state to be desired. We shall do well therefore to put mystery in its right place, and see what we owe to it.

I think it is plain from what has been said that mystery is not the same as uncertainty. If this is not plain, I cannot make it so. The things most certain to us are to us the most mysterious. And I think it must also be plain that mystery does not always imply real obscurity. Many a subject is profoundly mysterious to us that is not obscure, in any such manner as to work real perplexity in our minds. Mystery underlies and overhangs the whole, but is not where it gives us difficulty. It is wholesome to note these facts, which may somewhat clear our vision in a world of mystery, and prepare us to estimate our debt to mystery aright.

Shall I dare to say that mystery gives us religion? It is almost true. Certainly we may say, No mystery, no religion. If we did not live in a world of spiritual reality so profound as to be mysterious, no thought of such a thing as religion would ever arise. Religion is the outreach of the soul into the unseen. If there were no unseen realm in which the soul felt interest and knew that it had vast necessities, the whole realm that is now occupied by religion would be a blank. So we do well to be glad of this all-surrounding atmosphere of mystery, in which religion lives and moves and has its being. Let us not complain of it, as if we should be better off without it. It is the sphere in which our noblest blessings come to meet us. No mystery, no religion, whether in the earthly life or in the ever-expanding heavenly.

For example, it is in the realm of mystery that we pray. Life is too great for us, duty is too solemn and difficult, and destiny too overwhelming; we cannot go alone. Moreover, we have within us that mysterious impulse to speak out into the unseen, sure that there is some one there to hear. Greatest fact and mystery of all, there is the present God, surrounding us ever, and available for help to the soul that relies upon him. There is a Father, full of grace and truth, whom our eyes do not behold, and whose nearness and goodness we

can learn by faith and experience alone. Here are all the suitable conditions for prayer; and prayer has risen, the wide world through, to meet them. But leave the mystery out, and what would prayer be? If it could exist at all, it could be nothing but plain talk, no greater than it appears, unsuggestive, uninspiring, prosaic, barren. Unmeasured aspiration, desires too great for words, "groanings that cannot be uttered," longings that reach out into the undiscovered country, the awe and rapture of standing in the unseen presence of holiness and glory, the bliss of communing with invisible love—where would all these be if mystery were eliminated from our life? It is in that immeasurable, inestimable, undiscoverable, which nevertheless is but the extension of that which is already ours—it is in this that the experimental power of our religion resides. It is here that our spiritual being may rise above itself and commune with God.

Moreover, it is only in the realm of mystery that we can possibly find due sense of the greatness of truth, and of God himself. The true is the real; truth is that which is. To know truth is to know that which is. But as a matter of fact, that which is is infinitely beyond us, stretching out on every side, and the world that is is a world of mystery. Only in a world of mystery, therefore, can truth, or any truth, be discerned aright. We might be

trained, I know, to suppose truth capable of perfect definition, with all lines distinct and final ; and we might think ourselves doing it best justice when we craved comprehensive statements that could be carried, statements compact, neat, and sufficient for a lifetime. But truth is not such that it can thus be carried complete in handy form. Our clearest statements are often clear because they are inadequate ; we can make them neat because they include so little. That vast element which we cannot include in full is essential to the true thought of truth ; and only when we behold truth shading off into the brightness of mystery do we begin to see it as it is. And what shall I say of our conception of him concerning whom our studies in religion lead us both first and last to think ? We might imagine that God could be adequately set forth in words, and bounded by sharp definitions ; but we know better. Well do we know that he is far beyond us in our utmost reach of thought. If we try to think of him without recognizing the mystery of infinity, we utterly misconceive him, and think no true thought of him at all. We may think of him, with the king, as dwelling in the thick darkness, or with the apostle, as dwelling in light unapproachable, or with the prophet, as inhabiting eternity ; in any case we must admit to our thought the element of mystery, or we cannot

know him as he is. Omit this, and we worship a God narrowed to our own dimensions, and a God who never lived. Thus whatever true sense we have of his eternal greatness and glory we owe to our living in the world of mystery.

If religion is indebted to the fact of mystery, so is theology. The influence of mystery upon our thinking in theology is wondrously ennobling. Need I dwell upon it? When do we grow narrow, unspiritual, and unable to discern the things of God? When we think we know it all; when we fancy that our definitions fence in the field. The sense of mystery, as we have seen, is the sense of largeness in the truth we deal with. It humbles us. Here everything at last is rational and intelligible, but everything is infinite—and who is he that thinks himself ready to know it all? If once we thoroughly learn the lesson of our own littleness in the midst of the infinite, then indeed it begins to be possible for us to know aright. Mystery teaches us our littleness. Yet at the same time, how the mystery that attends religion quickens our minds, wakens our hearts, inspires our adoration, stirs our deepest longings, and irresistibly attracts our zeal! In such a world as that of religion, who can rest without reaching out to that which is still beyond? This attraction is inexhaustible, because God is infinite. It will remain with us, or we with it, for-

ever. "While life and thought and being last" God will still be mysterious to created spirits, and the charm of pressing on to know the Lord will be upon us. Clearness of perception and statement is good, and we will strive for it, in its place, and we shall ever be gaining more of it as we go on; and yet the clearer our thought of him whom our souls love, the farther off into infinity will stretch our vision of that which we have yet to learn concerning him. -Mystery, rightly used, is never the death of clearness; rather is it the life without which clearness itself is dead.

It is by due recognition of the real mystery of religion that we can avoid making our theology too mysterious. In this realm there are mysteries and mysteries. The mystery that belongs to the nature of things, the depth of reality, and the greatness of God and man, abides forever. We would not escape it if we could, for it is the robe of the eternal, and the eternal glory shines through it. But we can easily make mysteries besides. We can perplex ourselves and one another by too sharp defining. We can fail to trust the rationality of God, and think we must bring all to the measure of our own present rationality. Thus we may labor too hard for completeness and consistency, and make a system so consistent that it agrees well with nothing but itself, the world of God and man

being too large for it. We can bring one thing into opposition with another, and state matters infinite so definitely as to provoke doubt rather than invite faith. Such difficulties of over-systematizing, when we have created them, we shall very likely call mysteries, and class with the mysteries divine amid which God has placed us all; and then theology will seem to us to be hopelessly full of mysteries, some of them heart-breaking mysteries.

But if we live and move and have our being in the midst of the true mystery of God, we shall be delivered from much of the temptation to this harmful method. A sense of the real mystery divine is the surest safeguard against burdening ourselves with needless mysteries human. When we believe in the rationality of God, mysteries that consist in contradiction will retire from our field. When we feel the infinity of truth we shall not be over-dogmatic, or so limit truth as to make it troublesome to faith. When we know our own littleness in the face of the vast unity of truth in God, we shall make our systems simple, flexible, free to growth, and the only mystery that we are likely to encourage in them is that mystery into which we all were born and in which all souls must live forever.

Within these walls we hope to spend a year together in study of the things of God. Let us begin our work in the attitude of reverence. How

great is God! how great is truth!—how much greater than we know or can ever know! With unspeakable reverence let us stand together in so solemn a presence. Let us be humbly glad of our calling to be students of God, and take the place of little children learning at our Father's feet. Yet let us enter upon our year of work with eagerness and hope. Upon how vast and inspiring a field of study are we entering! The one thing that we know is, that it stretches infinitely beyond our present vision, and is full, both near and far, of the riches of God's grace and truth. Rich returns await our labor, in the revelation of God and the gift of his truth, to every soul that is in earnest. Eagerly, therefore, let us go forward to our labor, being sure that the God whom we are seeking to know will be known of us and will do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.



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